

Mr Gove goes topsy-turvy

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Secretary of
State Michael
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ways

Was it the grandstanding claim by Keir Starmer that he would 'drive a coach and horses' through the planning system in order to deliver more housing that prompted Michael Gove to go all Stalinist about housing delivery?

As the front-page Times headline put it: 'New homes to be forced through', with the additional heading 'Councils risk losing planning powers if they reject developments'. The longer story included the suggestion that Gove would set up a state housing organization (shades of Singapore) to ensure that housing takes place where and when it is needed. Particularly around Cambridge, it seems. That city, despite well publicised water shortages, is to be on the receiving end of plans for 150,000 homes (100,000 fewer than previously announced, but still . . .)

Is this the same Michael Gove who called in for inquiry a large housing scheme approved by Hounslow Council in spring 2021? Indeed it is – perhaps with good cause, since the planning inspector recommended refusal, describing the proposed development, featuring 16 blocks of up to 17 storeys as being too large in scale, and collectively forming an 'incongruous, monolithic wall of development'.

Guess what? Gove then rejected the inspector's findings and granted approval! The question the grateful housebuilder was too polite to ask was: why Gove had initiated a public inquiry in the first place? It has taken nearly three years for nothing to be built. The Secretary of State for Levelling Up (or is it Dumbing Down?) is now the greatest advocate for hitting that pesky 300,000 homes a year target, which only recently he dismissed as only being a number, whereas what really matters is quality. Identification by planners of land for housing development is back, after recent attacks on the idea of five-year land supplies.

On the quality front, all we can say is that this government cannot even commit to compulsory minimum space standards; their advisory standards for family homes are a joke unless you like killing cats by swinging them in any dimension in the miserable bedrooms politicians think are suitable for proles.

As ever, Gove wants to have it both ways. He is keen on being the housebuilders' greatest supporter, but also happy if planning authorities reject designs which harm the character of an area – presumably excluding 17-storey towers. There is always an escape clause in Gove-land, which is why his fantasy-figure housing targets are being treated with healthy scepticism by companies that actually build homes.

Of course the chickens in Gove-world are unlikely to come home to roost – because we have an election coming up next year. Those Hounslow homes may have made a start on site by then, but it is all too little, too late. ■

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Time to show some teeth

It's no longer
about money.
It's about
existential need.

Michael Gove's letter to Sadiq Khan in December responding to the London Housing Delivery Taskforce's (LHDTF) position statement shows some dirigiste thinking unhelpful to solving a truth universally acknowledged - London has the UK's worst housing crisis.

'If you cannot do what is needed to deliver the homes that London needs, I will,' he threatens.

If only. We doubt you'll get the chance, Mr Gove, and, if an unlikely miracle May general election offers an undeserved lifeline, that you will unlock the resources needed to build the true amount of social and affordable homes London needs. Which is way beyond the London Plan's official targets for each year and for the plan period.

One sensible suggestion made by the LHDTF is that Government should re-open the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) debt settlement to enable local authorities to borrow cheaply. This was agreed in 2012, 12 years ago.

Gove's answer is deeply ideological. The settlement, he says was intended to run for 30 years - 'the length of the typical HRA business plan. There are no plans to review it 'as we are only 10 years into the settlement'.

This is ye olde Monetarism. Nothing, not a housing crisis, and certainly not the fiscal desires of spendthrift local authorities, gets in the way of the holy war on inflation. Not even if the economy of the capital begins to fail because of the lack of affordable homes. Wrong Mr Gove. And to keep sticking to a 30 year plan is daft when all around is evidence of the need for fresh thinking. It's no longer about money. It's about existential need.

The only way sufficient affordable and social homes will ever be provided is if collective money - taxes - are used to encourage their development by whoever can deliver.

The Public Works Loan Board, the bank boroughs borrow from, should offer fixed rate loans, ideally at a reduced rate, argues the LHDTF. No way, says Gove. You get a 0.4% reduction on market interest rates as it is and we'll review as usual in June 2024. Wrong again.

The rocketing of interest rates, in case you hadn't noticed Mr Gove, bust a hole in all private and public housing development plans, and the HRA settlement is also deeply unhelpful. It would be a devout atonement if the Treasury were to make available fixed rate long term loans to local authorities. Housing development needs certainty, in finance (as in planning). But see again the dead hand of the Treasury and outdated Tory ideology in Gove's response.

No amount of S106-provided affordable homes will ever touch the sides of the capital's shortage. Fiscal relaxation is needed, so the public sector can partially fund, and the private sector can help deliver, the homes Londoners need. Let's hope the Mayor's task force, due to respond in January, shows some teeth in asking for what's needed. ■

Neophobes are always with us

'It hurts me when I see new buildings.' This statement of confidence in the present and future appeared in a Times interview with Lord Mendoza, appointed as head of historic England in the summer.

As provost of Oriel College Oxford, he knows a thing or two about troublesome presents, since the college's connection to colonialist/imperialist/benefactor Cecil Rhodes caused student protests who wanted his statue removed. And why stop there?

Resolution of the issues suggests that Lord M is a skilful diplomat, so his neophobe comments about new buildings are a little surprising. He wonders if retrofits and the sustainability benefits they bring should be part of the Historic England strategy for protecting buildings and places which might be threatened by development, good, bad or indifferent.

This is not a bad idea. It always seemed extraordinary that HE's predecessor body, English Heritage, was so keen on knocking down Robin Hood Gardens in east London, by Peter and Alison Smithson, given the huge amounts of embodied energy contained in the social housing block. But then at the time, the organization was bending over backwards to please its Secretary of State, who had made it quite plain that neither she, nor her constituents (who were completely irrelevant since they were not local to RHG), liked concrete.

Even former apostles of the new, like David Chipperfield, seem to be having second thoughts about the merits of new construction. At an Architecture Foundation event, to celebrate his Pritzker Prize award, he said he regretted the demolition of a slim 1960's building in Hanover Square, and its replacement with a more up-to-date building no doubt delivered for investors who simply saw profit to be made from increased land values. Well yes, but you couldn't help wondering what the 1960s building replaced. Message to Lord Mendoza: everything was new once.

Over-egging a bland pudding

Thomas Heatherwick is no neophobe. On the contrary, he wants everything to be whizzy and designerly. The worst thing you can say about a building, in his book (and he has just published one), is that it is boring – or bland, if there is a dis-

tinction to be made. *Humanise: a maker's guide to building our world* has some thoughtful arguments and insights within it. He argues among other things that we have been suffering from a 'global blandemic', flowing from the evils of Corbusian town planning and the 'cult of Modernism' which has stealthily infected every architecture student in the land. Up to a point, Lord Copper.

An accompanying BBC radio series (hats off to TH's marketing people!) was, however, a curate's egg. Among the claims made: people can die from heart attacks brought on by bland environments; the Syrian civil war was fuelled by boring buildings; architects were forced to be members of the RIBA at the end of the 19th century (in fact compulsory registration was only introduced in 1931, and did not require anybody to join the RIBA). It was also stated that the new president of the RIBA, Muiywa Oki, is the first non-white to hold the post. This will have come as a surprise to Sunand Prasad (RIBA president 2007 to 2009). I suppose facts can be boring too.

All eyes on the London Stirling Prize

Although this year's Stirling Prize dinner was held in Manchester, five of the six finalists were London projects, which looked unbalanced to say the least. No big architectural beasts this year, but a very worthy winner in Mae Architects' facility for the elderly. Alex Ely of Mae makes a good point when he argues that the standards they achieved with the project should be the norm rather than the exception; were that the case then the search for the truly outstanding would be that much more difficult.

This brings us back to another Heatherwick issue: the desirability the ordinary. It must have occurred to him that his often-extraordinary structures and designs have that quality because of the existence of the mundane everyday. Frankly, I would rather have boring housing which is decent in terms of space, volume and environmental standards, than something with immediate external visual appeal which may be a disaster internally.

Designing exclamation marks and putting them all together means none of them are exclamations any more. Question to Thomas: is quiet prose boring?

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When retrofit is not the answer

The legal challenge to refusal of planning permission for a redevelopment of the Marks & Spencer store at the east end of Oxford Street continues to generate debate about carbon, concrete, intensification, land values and the integrity of the UK planning system. As readers may recall, Westminster Council and the London mayor supported the redevelopment proposal, but it was called in for public inquiry by the Secretary of State responsible for planning, Michael Gove. After a lengthy public inquiry, the inspector concluded that the development should be permitted. Mr Gove overturned that decision, but his own conclusions, which are fuzzy and certainly do not focus on carbon as an issue, are now being challenged legally by a furious M&S.

Having founded and launched the *Architects' Journal* Retrofit Awards a decade ago (they are still going strong), I am all in favour of this form of architecture, and I agree that an analysis of retrofit/re-use/recycling options should be part of any architectural analysis.

However, this does not automatically mean that it is always appropriate. The inquiry inspector said the retrofit proposed by Save Britain's Heritage 'is so deeply problematic, even for Oxford Street that no-one would be likely to pursue it or fund it'.

At Para 13.70, the inspector's letter says this: 'I find that there is no viable and deliverable alternative and that refusing the application would probably lead to the closure of the store, the loss of M&S from the Marble Arch end of Oxford Street, and substantial harm to the vitality and viability of the area. This is a material consideration of substantial weight.'

No wonder M&S are going to court. ■

MALLETT

Big shifts in the right direction

Amid ongoing stories about the waning appeal of the UK stock market - the IPO desertions to the US where values are so much stronger, the lack of confidence that pension funds' minimal 4% holding in UK equities represents - an ever more nurturing City Corporation is, despite the gloom, steadily transforming the roads, pavements and public realm we imagine as made of gold, while also approving 11 new towers. Dick Whittington would approve the chutzpah and faith in the future.

The Corporation is already reviewing its far-sighted 25-year Transport Strategy, only adopted pre-pandemic in 2019. A public consultation on closed on 7 January. We can expect the review to complete in May 2024, when the strategy will be adopted and published, to align with the Draft City Plan 2040, which goes to committee approval between January and March and then to public consultation.

Assistant director for policy and projects, Bruce McVean, summarised the strategy review at December's City Architecture Forum meeting under the heading City Streets Transport for a changing Square Mile. And the impression is not so much of a transport strategy, as a strategy for place. Every effort is being made to optimise public realm. Other boroughs should be envious.

Transport is of course a big villain in climate change. And the Government's policy, as Roy McGowan of consultants Momentum Transport reminded attendees, envisages decarbonising transport by 2050. We've been told to stop predicting and providing, and to 'vision' and 'validate' using evi-

dence instead. And this is what the City seems to be about.

The good news said McVean is that 'we've seen a pretty solid return to the office'. Total entry and exits at TfL stations in the City - on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays only at around 2.2m is up on 2022 and rising to meet 2019 levels (c2.7m).

More speculative, but perhaps even more impressive is that the GLA is projecting City jobs to jump from around 650,000 now to more than 740,000 by 2040. These are the drivers of the City's desire, and the need, to optimise the City's public realm.

City to create a spectacularly transformed string of major new public realm

And in terms of modal shift, overall traffic since 2000 has fallen by around 20%, while the number of people cycling keeps rising, having increased four-fold in that time. Numbers driving in the City has been slashed by two-thirds.

These are big shifts in the right direction. Cycles are now the biggest percentage of wheeled movement at 26.8%, although taxis, cars and private hire vehicles combined still account for c.40% when combined. But unlike all other categories, cycling is increasing, while other categories are declining.

The overall need, however, remains how to balance the fiercely competing needs of pedestrian and vehicular movements that will only increase if the predicted jobs turn up. A streets survey of City folk last year makes people's priorities clear - they want great accessible walkable streets that are safer and quieter. A desire expressed more intensely than the need, for example to 'get more people cycling'.



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Streets that inspire and delight, inclusivity and accessibility are the watchwords, and the notion that 'the City's success cannot be separated from the outstanding environments that enable it.' Place is what generates everything, in other words. And there are now five Business Improvement Districts in the City that fervently believe in that all pursuing change with the Corporation's blessing.

New, colourful, playful and more widely distributed public seating is being installed in various locations. 'We need more,' said Mc Vean. And shade and shelter, along with raised crossing to slow traffic, and more pedestrianisation, recaptured from roadways or where feasible, minor road closures to create new pockets of pedestrian dominated public realm where vehicles have restricted access only.

The changes at Bank junction since 2017 will continue and have so far 'saved' or recaptured six tennis courts' worth of space for pedestrians. So much that after no less than 25 years of being badgered by the highly successful restaurant at 1 Lombard Street overlooking the junction, the City has finally found the space and allowed one of the City's best know eateries to put some tables outside. Some things could perhaps move faster. Further changes include making Threadneedle Street cycle only in term of vehicle movement.

And the much anticipated demise of the St Paul's gyratory system will create another major new public space on the core's western end, linking up to the improvements of Paternoster Square - and eventually perhaps combining with the proposed development at London Wall West, and who knows, London Wall itself, to create a spectacularly transformed string of major new public realm. Plans are also afoot for improvements to Fleet Street, to augment the arrival of the new City of London Courts (SEE next item). ■ SEE ALSO report by Nico Bosetti

